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ABSTRACT

The following trends have been in motion in the field of early childhood development (ECD) for some time: (1) the concept of ECD is increasingly taking on additional connotations; (2) in Europe children are becoming a minority group and other age groups, such as the elderly, see them as competitors for the same limited resources; (3) the downward extension of primary school education to include younger age groups will continue; (4) the number of children with access to ECD will grow and a large section of society will be catered for, but at the same time, some groups of socially excluded young families will become virtually unreachable; and (5) international cooperation and exchange of "good practice" will expand and intensify. Some future scenarios can be "willed" and with sufficient "will power" they could actually happen. Most large-scale ECD intervention programs skirt emotive but fundamental issues such as child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, domestic violence, and discrimination. The impact on the well-being of children could be improved if they were to be incorporated. The majority of large-scale intervention programs are conservative in the sense that they seek to provide responses to yesterday's problems. To increase their effectiveness, these programs should anticipate the "newly emerging needs" of children. (MKA)

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EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: TRENDS AND LIKELY SCENARIOS

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EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: TRENDS AND LIKELY SCENARIOS

The following trends have been in motion in the field of ECD for some time. They appear to be subject to an autonomous movement.

1. The concept of Early Childhood Development (ECD) is increasingly taking on additional connotations. Originally defined in terms of processes and events related to children, ECD is more and more described as a policy tool, an integral component of women's empowerment, a building block in a nation's overall development, and an area for intervention and programme development.

2. In Europe children are becoming a minority group. Other age groups, such as the elderly, see them as competitors for the same limited resources. The younger the children, the more they will have to depend on 'advocates' to protect their space while older children will become more empowered in defending their position. In order to be sustainable, programmes will have to cater to the intersecting needs of these competing age groups.

3. The downward extension of primary school education to include younger age groups will continue. More countries will follow this practice and ever younger children will be involved. Against this backdrop, the debate on 'schooling versus holistic development' will gain new significance.

4. The number of children with access to ECD will grow and a large section of society will be catered for. At the same time, some groups of socially excluded young families will become virtually unreachable.

5. International cooperation and exchange of 'good practice' will expand and intensify. There will be a freer flow of learning. Innovative approaches will mainly emerge at the grass-roots levels and particularly in developing countries or 'regions in development'.

Some future scenarios can be 'willed' and with sufficient 'will power' they could actually happen. Some recommended and probable scenarios are:

6. Most large-scale ECD intervention programmes skirt emotive but fundamental issues such as child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, domestic violence, and discrimination. The impact on the well-being of children could be improved if they were to be incorporated.

7. The majority of large-scale intervention programmes are conservative in the sense that they seek to provide responses to yesterday's problems. To increase their effectiveness, these programmes should anticipate the 'newly emerging needs' of children.

Trend I

The concept of Early Childhood Development (ECD) is increasingly taking on additional connotations. Originally defined in terms of processes and events related to children, ECD is more and more described as a policy tool, an integral component of women's empowerment, a building block in a nation's overall development, and an area for intervention and programme development.

In the world of policy makers, development organizations and donors ECD is loosely defined and tends to incorporate a range of inter-linked activities and processes seeking to benefit children. Components and activities relating to parent education, mothers' groups, community development, child advocacy, children's rights, maternal health, and even income generating initiatives and capacity building become part and parcel of ECD. Programmes for children may include elements related to:

> *educating caregivers*: aimed at educating and empowering parents, family and other caregivers;
> *promoting community development:* stimulating community awareness and community participation;
> *delivering a service*: strengthening child development by catering to the needs of children in centres outside the home;
> *strengthening national resources and capacities:* building up the human, financial and material resources of institutions responsible for implementing programmes;
> *strengthening demand and awareness*: this focuses on the production and distribution of knowledge among the public to increase awareness, create a demand for services, and build political will among policy makers;
> *developing national child care and family policies*: encouraging policies which are sensitive to the needs of families and women with respect to their child caring responsibilities;
> *developing supportive legal and regulatory frameworks*: increasing awareness of rights and legal resources such as maternal leave and benefits, supporting breastfeeding for working mothers.

While these approaches are necessary means to create the right conditions for sustainable child development, there is a risk that they could become ends in themselves at the expense of the child. Thus a capacity building project may result in a stronger NGO, but not necessarily in healthier children. Another potentially difficult situation is created by the lack of child specialists in the field of ECD. Government departments, NGOs and donor organizations with professed child-oriented mandates are often staffed and managed by professionals with no track record or even commitment to children's issues.

Trend 2

In Europe, children are becoming a minority group. Other age groups, such as the elderly, see them as competitors for the same limited resources. The younger the children, the more they will have to depend on 'advocates' to protect their space while older children will become more empowered in defending their position. In order to be sustainable, programmes will have to cater to the intersecting needs of these competing age group.

Economic growth and globalization tend to bring prosperity to those who are in a favourable position but make the weak, among whom are many children, more vulnerable. It also creates the remarkable paradox that in the face of increased incomes, the costs of certain services, including care, often rise to the point of becoming unaffordable[1]. This has negative consequences for the social sector in particular. No government is able to finance the services it would like to extend to all its citizens. The financing of care for the elderly, the handicapped and children, in particular, proves to go beyond their carrying capacity.

With the number of children decreasing and the number of older people growing, children's voices may carry less far. Without being aware of it, or even wanting it, society's positive attitude towards children may erode as a consequence. One possible way to prevent this from happening is to guarantee a minimum of child friendliness by fixing it to a standard: a *child friendliness index*[2]. The Index would reveal how society treats its children. It would offer information on basic services like education, safety and health, but also on the presence of appropriate development tasks and opportunities for participation, challenge and assuming responsibility open to children and the society.

In both public policy and research studies, children are increasingly described as active, autonomous actors rather than as passive, dependent recipients. There is also an appreciation of the right of children to participate in decisions regarding their lives. Obviously, the older the children, the more they will be able to effectively take part in society. The need for advocacy for younger children will remain.

Given the climate of increased competition among age groups, it is likely that most progress will be made in those areas where the needs and interests of these groups intersect. Thus, child care is promoted because it is good for children, it allows mothers to work outside, and also contributes to a stable society.

Scenarios in ECD

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[1] In richer countries domestic help is beyond the means of the majority, while in poorer countries the humblest shopkeeper may employ a full-time cleaner. This paradox is sometimes referred to as the Baumol disease, named after the economist W. Baumol who first described this relationship.

[2] ICDI is currently developing such a *child friendliness index*.

Trend 3

The downward extension of primary school education to include younger age groups will continue. More countries will follow this practice and ever younger children will be involved. Against this backdrop, the debate on 'schooling versus holistic development' will gain new significance.

Educators will continue to argue that children should develop in a 'holistic' manner. Roughly, this means that attention should be given to their health and nutritional status, psycho-social development and their education. Some people would also include their spiritual development. In Europe, as in many other parts of the world, health and nutrition is taken for granted and the emphasis has shifted to education, in particular to increasing cognitive skills and school achievements.

The importance of psycho-social development is often overlooked by parents and education ministries. This situation is most pronounced in regions of fast economic development and accomplishments. The education systems in Japan and Singapore with their entry exams for pre-schools and pre-school cramming are the most obvious examples but similar experience can be found elsewhere as well. The prevailing intervention programmes for pre-school children reflect this general attitude as they mainly seek to help children do well in school, particularly in an academic sense.

On the other hand, educators, often supported by social welfare ministries, are keener on psycho-social development. Their views are rooted in theories of child development and are usually capped by the insistence that children should be "allowed to play".

There are only a few research efforts that compare 'cognition-oriented' interventions with 'holistic' interventions with respect to their impact on children. Although some evidence suggests that 'holistic' programmes are equally effective, if not more so than the 'cognition-oriented' programmes, the results are not conclusive. The debate on 'schooling versus holistic development' is likely to continue.

Although the demand for 'schooling' rather than 'education' may gain in strength, counter voices will continue to be heard. These voices will grow in meaning against a backdrop of changing norms and values and of an increasingly interdependent, multi-cultural world in which children as children, and later as adults, must have more than good schooling.

Trend 4

The number of children with access to ECD will grow and a large section of society will be catered for. At the same time, some groups of socially excluded young families will become virtually unreachable.

ECD services are expanding at a steady rate all over the world and more children and families are participating in them than ever before. Many disadvantaged children are also included in these services. For the majority of children, therefore, the future certainly looks brighter than before. All over Europe as well, major efforts are being made to extend ECD services to children and young families. But these are often underused precisely by those children who would benefit most from them. Many of these belong to families that could be described as socially excluded.

Lack of appropriate services is not the only reason for poor take up. Socially excluded families face many other barriers to full participation. In order for services to reach marginalized and excluded segments, public awareness would have to grow and strategies to improve access to services would need to be introduced. The nature of the services provided would also have to be scrutinized with respect to their suitability for supporting children 'at risk'. In addition, questions would need to be raised to increase our understanding of this phenomenon.

The first set of questions concerns the quality of services. Are the services designed for disadvantaged families adequate? Do they promote the overall development of children and do they help to overcome the barriers that exclude them from full participation in society? Or, are they second-rate and therefore reinforcing disadvantage? Most ECD programmes in use in Europe are pretty standard and apart from some contextual features share many similarities. This despite their claims of being 'innovative', 'alternative', 'experimental', 'flexible' or 'pluriform'.

A second and related question is whether these expanding ECD services reach the 'hard-core' of socially excluded families in any substantial manner. Are there groups of families in Europe that are more socially excluded then ever before? Could it be said that there is a causal relationship between current social and economic policies - which seek to serve the majority - and the emergence of a small minority of hard-core unreachable groups?

There are innumerable biases against reaching the unreachable. Most of these are deeply engrained and pervasive and call for a profound understanding of the causes of exclusion and of the system that seeks to break it. There are, however, a number of strategies that are promising and that have proven to be effective, often under extreme conditions and in a variety of circumstances.

Trend 5

International cooperation and exchange of 'good practice' will expand and intensify. There will be a freer flow of learning. Innovative approaches will mainly emerge at the grass-roots levels and particularly in developing countries or 'regions in development'.

International cooperation is becoming a common phenomenon in all walks of life and ECD is no exception to this. International exchange of expertise is now as commonplace for para-professional community mothers as it is for university researchers and heads of government departments. This international exchange is further enhanced and facilitated by easier access to ever-expanding information banks.

There is a prevailing assumption that answers to many serious problems have been found. Policy makers and donors, in particular, argue that top priority should be given to disseminating 'examples of good practice' rather than reinventing the wheel. Two contrasting approaches are clearly discernible. The first pushes for uniform, standardized and possibly even franchised solutions. The second highlights the uniqueness of local situations and the need for adapting to them.[3]

Innovations in ECD are emerging from those areas where families and children live under conditions of hardship. The majority of such families live in developing countries and in regions of rapid transition or upheaval. Innovative approaches are likely to be pioneered by community-based organizations and local NGOs and will draw upon human resources and social networks. Some examples are: community-mothers groups, home-care arrangements, as well as a host of voluntary schemes. Innovations based on educational research and advanced technology are likely to come from developed countries.

The question of what constitutes high-quality ECD is the topic of an ongoing debate. There are some who believe that this equals the involvement of highly-trained care-givers who work on the basis of an elaborate educational theory and research data and who have access to sophisticated educational and teaching aids. A smaller group argue that quality ECD can also be attained by working with poorly-educated, community-based workers who have to make do with limited means but are highly motivated and have an abundant local knowledge.

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[3] For a detailed review of the contrasting strategies of going to scale, see Rekha Wazir & Nico van Oudenhoven, *Increasing the coverage of social programmes*, International Social Science Journal, 1998, Vol.155, March, pp 145-154.

Trend 6

Most large-scale intervention programmes skirt emotive but fundamental issues such as child abuse and neglect, substance abuse, domestic violence, and discrimination. The impact on the well-being of children could be improved if they were to be incorporated.

It is increasingly recognised that psycho-sociological problems have a profound impact on the development, well-being and functioning of children. Yet, most large-scale intervention programmes do not address these problems. Usually they pursue objectives that are politically correct, such as the provision of a safe and stimulating environment or the preparation for school.

Sexual abuse, domestic violence, addiction, neglect and discrimination are affecting an increasingly larger number of children and at an increasingly younger age. Yet, a concern for these issues seldom finds its way into mainstream ECD programmes. Specialized programmes dealing with these issues do exist but they are rarely integrated in the large-scale interventions. It could be argued that these matters are deliberately avoided lest controversies arise.

To make significant headway in ECD, these questions need to be tackled with some urgency. There is a need to 'problematize' ECD. Most of the themes currently included in intervention programmes have been on the agenda for many years, and although they still need attending to, other pressing problems should be addressed as well.

The majority of large-scale intervention programmes are conservative in the sense that they seek to provide responses to yesterday's problems. To increase their effectiveness, these programmes should anticipate the 'newly emerging needs' of children.

Trend 7

Children are faced with a range of new challenges, problems and opportunities. Many of these are not recognized, nor are they given adequate attention. These problems are new in the sense that they are not discussed in regular text books on education or child psychology, nor are they dealt with at policy levels. Parents and care givers do not have the skills to fully recognize them let alone the experience to address them. Society as a whole appears unable to identify these needs and challenges and to formulate coherent responses. For example, there are children born with HIV; children who have multiple parents or parents of the same sex; those who have witnessed the murder of their parents or know of parents who have killed their children. Other children have been adopted in far-away countries, or have unknown donor fathers. Some children have open access to adult information or experience, or are pushed into adult roles at an early age. More and more children appear to be immune to hitherto effective medicines, while their vulnerability to diseases increases. A growing number of children are adopting alien lifestyles and values as a result of *globalization*.

The impact of these situations on the development of children varies from the severe to the superficial. Most of these problems are relatively rare and *on their own* do not constitute a major area of concern. *Taken together*, however, they may pose a serious threat to children. They may impinge on their future economic status, their cognitive and emotional development, their schooling and their relation to others and to society as a whole.

Inasmuch as the emergence of new developmental threats to children is hardly a subject for discussion, the underlying causes are given even less attention. At this stage, only speculations can be made. It seems probable that the rapid changes in society, the increased interaction with other peoples and cultures, *globalization* of the economy and information systems are related processes. These processes, individually or combined, create a myriad of different conditions and situations each of which may pose a unique challenge to children, create specific needs and demand special attention. It could further be speculated that in those places and regions where social transition is at its sharpest, these challenges will be expressed in their most dramatic forms. They may be encountered among the urban poor, the unemployed, immigrant communities and otherwise socially excluded groups.

Many good things are happening as well. Children are exposed to an ever increasing range of opportunities and challenges to develop their potential, to widen their horizon and to enter new fields of experience. These, too, are not properly recognized and responded to.

It is likely that each individual child may respond to newly emerging needs and challenges in a specific and unique way. It may also be assumed that there will be common patterns. Thus making the issue, then, is of international concern.